

THE MYSTERY OF *MOULD* ‘TOP OF THE HEAD’ IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

REMEDYBOOKS

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Abstract

The primary anatomical meaning of the word *mould* in Middle English was ‘top of the head’. According to historical dictionaries, *mould* could also mean ‘fontanelle’ and ‘coronal suture’. None of the three senses fit the many recipe headings mentioning “a man’s mould that is down” that are found in Middle English remedybooks. The present paper argues that *mould* in fact means ‘uvula’ in such recipe headings, an application that may have begun as the result of a copyist not fully understanding the text that he was copying. *OED* and *MED* should add the sense ‘uvula’ to their entries for *mould*, illustrated by some of the examples that are cited in the paper.

The following recipes occur in a fifteenth-century collection of medical remedies edited by Fritz Heinrich (1896: 95):

For þe molde þat is doune. Take þe leeuys of egrimoyne a good qwantite, & wasche hem, & grynde hem, & do þer to a good quantite of hony, & let frye hem wel to gedre, & let schauē þe heued as fer as þe plastre shal be, & ley þe plastre on þe moolde al hoot as þe seek may suffre. Item stampe celydoyne wyþ may buter, & let frye hem wel to gedre, and streyne hem þorouȝ a kaneuas, and do þat in boxes, for þat is good to a noynte wyþ þe moolde, þat is doun.

The remedybook from which the above text has been taken is found in British Library Additional MS 33996 (fols 76v–148v). The editor collates that manuscript with five other

ones,¹ each of them containing recipes for “a man’s mould that is down” or “a man’s mould that is fallen”. The text “For moold fallinge” appears in the margin of one of the manuscripts.

It is difficult to see what medical condition the medieval writers had in mind when they wrote recipes for curing the *mould*. Evidently, the word denotes a part of the body, as the passages mention placing a plaster on the *mould* or anointing it. Of the six homonymous headwords in the *OED*, *mould/mold* n.2 ‘the top or dome of the head’ is the only one that would make sense in the context of applying the plaster.² The corresponding entry in the *MED* is that for *molde(e)* n.(2) ‘the top or crown of the head; the head’.³ The word goes back to Old English *molde (molde)*, similarly used of the highest point of the head.⁴ In some Middle English recipes for “a mould that is down”, the word *head* is used instead of *mould* in instructions on where to apply the medicine:

And [‘if’] a mon thenke that is molde be adon. Tak the leues of egrimoyne and seth hem in hony and make a plastre therof and thenne do it vnto thin hed and bind hit wel therto and let it ligge ther al a dai al hol. And it schal saue the and make the wel.⁵

For þe moold þat is adowne. Take þe levys of egremoyne & seep hem in hony & make a plastre & ley vpon þe moolde & it schall sone amende. Or seep celydoyne in butter or in clene grece and anoynte þerwiþ þyn heed.⁶

¹ British Library [=BL] Sloane MSS 405 and 3153, BL Royal MSS 17 A.III and 19674, BL Harley MS 1600.

² *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> accessed 22 January 2017. The *OED* also lists the sense ‘a fontanelle on an infant’s head’.

³ In *MED* the word is also said to mean ‘the coronal suture’. <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>> accessed 22 January 2017.

⁴ Bosworth and Toller (1898) s.v. *molde or molde*; Toller (1921) s.v. *molde*.

⁵ BL Sloane MS 2457, fol. 11r.

⁶ BL Sloane MS 1764, fol. 11r.

It seems clear that *mould* does indeed signify ‘the top of the head’ or possibly just ‘head’ in those parts of the recipes that describe the application of the plaster. The use of the word in the heading of the recipe is, however, something of a mystery. How can the top of the head be “down”? Conceivably, the expression might be used of a state of sorrow or dejection. The problem with that interpretation is that the simple adverb *down* has not been attested in such senses in Middle English. The *MED* s.v. *down* adv. records only the combinations *doun caste* and *doun folde* ‘cast down; dejected’ (sense 5a.b). In the *OED* s.v. *down* adv., the earliest citation of *down* ‘into or in low spirits’ (sense 18) dates from 1612. Moreover, there are versions of the Middle English recipes that point to something physical being raised or lifted up:

For a mannes moolde þat is doun. Take a good quantite of þe leefis of egremoine and wasch hem clene & grind hem smal... Or take & stamp celidoine & fri it wele in mai boter & þan strein it & do it in boxes & þer anoint þe molde þat is doun aftir þat þe forseide plaistre haþ reised it aȝen.⁷

In one remedybook (Hunt and Benskin 2001: 95), the *mould* is said to *become down* in the afflicted patient, the verb *become* here most likely being used in the sense ‘come, arrive’ (*OED* s.v., sense 1a):

⁷ BL Sloane MS 3153, fol. 77r.

Item if þe molde becum [*a down* added in margin]. Tack þe leues of egremoyne and seit hem in huni and mac a playstre and ley it abouen on þe molde, and þou salt warisse [‘recover’].

Although Heinrich’s *Medizinbuch* is included in the bibliography of both *OED* and *MED*, neither dictionary comments on the use of the word *mould* in the heading of the recipe cited at the beginning of this study. Nor has the heading been included in any of the citations listed under the entries for *mould*. The compound *mould-falling*, found in the margin of one of the manuscripts with which Heinrich collated his text, is not recorded in *OED* or *MED*. One possible reason for the omissions is that the heading and the compound do not seem to make any sense.

It is worth noting that the puzzling use of the word *mould* only appears in Middle English remedybooks. The bulk of such works consists of medicinal recipes, occasionally interspersed with other kinds of material relating to the cure of sickness and maintenance of health. The compilers borrowed freely from sources that they usually do not indicate, and the origins of any individual tract are difficult to trace. In the process of repeated copying, the content of the recipe was often subjected to scribal error, accidental introduction of a line from another recipe, synonym substitution, simplification by omission, confusion in word order, and amplification (Hargreaves 1981: 92). There are numerous examples of corrupt passages, even ghost words, found in Middle English remedybooks.⁸ It seems that references to “a man’s mould that is down” or “a man’s mould that is fallen” are the result of some such confusion in the transmission of the particular recipes. Nearly all the headings of the recipes in the

⁸ See e.g. Benskin (1985), Keiser (1978), Norri (1988a/b).

Medizinbuch are in Latin, which suggests that the content of the collection was ultimately derived from academic works written by university-trained physicians.

There is little doubt that the *mould* mentioned in the passages cited signifies a part of the head. Those sections of the remedybooks where the extracts come from deal with a variety of ailments of the head, including disorders like headache, migraine, toothache, freckles and other spots on the face, ocular growth, poor eyesight, malodorous nostrils, and ringworm of the scalp. The idea of something being “down” or “fallen” would fit inflammation or morbid elongation of the uvula. One of the fifteenth-century English translations of Guy de Chauliac’s surgical treatise describes a condition called the “fallynge of the ovefalle” as being “a maner of lousynge of the whiche þe dede of brethyng and of swolowynge is letted”.⁹ Another Middle English medical treatise, compiled from different ancient and medieval authorities by the so far unidentified “Austin”, contains a paragraph titled “Medicyn yn þe bygynnyng of a squynancie & in þe fallyng of þe grape, þe wich is clepud vuula”.¹⁰ Fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth-century medical manuscripts and early printed books contain a wealth of terms for an inflamed or elongated uvula based on the notion of the flap of tissue falling or becoming loose. Besides the Latin *casus uvule*, we find *fall of the uvula*, *falling of the grape*, *falling of the palate*, *falling of the uvefall*, *falling of uvula*, *loosing of the uvula*, *relaxation of the uvula*, and *relaxation of uve*.¹¹ It has been observed that “[f]or centuries, authors gave the uvula a prominence that may seem disproportionate to the modern reader”, the uvula being regarded as “a sentry between the mouth and the rest of the body” (Demaitre 2013: 198).

⁹ Ogden (1971: 491). *Ovefalle* means here ‘uvula’ and *letted* ‘prevented’.

¹⁰ Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 176/97, p. 211. At the beginning of the treatise, the writer states his purpose as follows: “to myn dere gossip Thomas Plawdon citiseyn & barbour of London I Austyn schal write sumdel of theorike & sumdel of practike þorue þe whiche 3e schulle þe betir entre in to þe worchyng of fisik in tyme of lakkyng of wise fysicians” (p. 39). Thomas Plawdon is probably Thomas Plouden, a London citizen and barber-surgeon, who died in 1413 (Voigts and McVaugh 1984: 15). *Squynancie* was a term for inflammation or swelling of the throat or parts of it.

¹¹ See the entries for these phrases in Norri (2016).

One of the forms of treatment used in uvular disorders was placing a medicinal plaster on the top of the patient's head. A fifteenth-century translation of Platearius' *Practica Brevis* states that "sum men leftyn vp þe vue sodenly thryes or foure tyme on a day" and prescribes "aurea wiþ oleo muscellino plastrid & made leuke & leyd to þe schod"¹² against the condition, *schod* being a variant spelling of *shed* 'the top of the head' (*OED* s.v. *shed* n.1, sense 2a; *MED* s.v. *shed(e)* n.). Middle English versions of Guy de Chauliac's surgical work employ the word *mould* to specify the location where the plaster is applied:

Pis iputte þerto, þat it is grauntede by Rogeryne and by his maistres to drye þe reumatik mater (and moste in children) þat þere be layde vpon the molde of þe hede, to þe quantyte of a peny, of scarlette, in þe whiche be a litel of picche, of frank encense and of mastik.¹³

Pis more þerto þat to fordrie þe reumatic mater & to releue or lifte vp aȝen þe vuula is grauntid bi Rogerin & his maistris & namli in childeren þat vpon þe molde of þe heed be put in þe quantite or breed of a peny of scarlet in which be a litil picche, encens & mastic.¹⁴

It seems that in the transmission of recipes from academic works to remedybooks, the word *mould* came to be copied from the end of the recipe to its heading. The copyists may have thought that the recipe in fact was meant for an ailment of the top of the head, as that was the

¹² Cambridge University Library MS Dd.10.44, fol. 34v. *Aurea* 'pills or boluses containing refined gold and silver'. *Oleum muscellinum* 'oil obtained from nutmegs (or possibly made with nutmegs)'.

¹³ Ogden (1971: 492). *Scarlette* 'cloth of scarlet colour'.

¹⁴ Cambridge, Jesus College MS Q.G.23, fol. 324v.

location for applying the plaster. If that was the case, they must have wondered how the top of the head could be “down” or “fall”. Another possibility is that the word *mould* was on purpose used to translate the Latin word *uvula*, for which there may not have been any existing vernacular term. The motivation for the extension of meaning would then be the fact that the uvula is a projection from the top part of the oral cavity. The latter theory would gain support from medieval texts other than the ones cited where *mould* is clearly used in the sense ‘uvula’, without any reference to the top of the head. One such paragraph occurs in a fifteenth-century remedybook titled “*Experimenta Dinamidiorum Libri Galieni*”:

Now it is to touche of þe medicines þat fallen for þe squincy. Tak diamorion abbatis and þis helpeþ alle maladies of þe rofe of mouþe and for þe þrote and it doþe arise þe molde þat is yfalle and moist it makeþ drie ... And whan tyme is enoynt þe molde and þe rofe of þe mouþe or elles do it holde it in þe þrote.¹⁵

The recipe is meant for curing *squincy*, which was a term covering various kinds of inflammation or swelling of the throat or parts of it.¹⁶ The medication prescribed should be applied to the throat, the palate, and the *mould*, which here unquestionably has the sense ‘uvula’.

The *OED* and the *MED* should add the sense ‘uvula’ to their entries for *mould/mold* n.2 and *molde(e)* n.(2), respectively. The above passage from “*Experimenta Dinamidiorum Libri Galieni*” would make an apt citation under that sense. The recipes against “a man’s mould that is down” or “a man’s mould that is fallen” could also be included among

¹⁵ BL Additional MS 34111, fols 126v–127r. *Diamorion abbatis* was an electuary containing crushed mulberries or juice extracted from mulberries. See Norri (2016) s.v. *diamoron*.

¹⁶ See Norri (2016) s.v. *squinsy*. The dictionary also lists *squinancy* (cf. note 10) and *quinsy*, which were similarly used of inflamed or swollen conditions of the throat. Of the three terms, *quinsy* may still be found in present-day medical works in the sense ‘peritonsillar abscess’ (*OED* s.v. *quinsy* n.).

those citations, possibly with a comment on how *mould* came to be used for the uvula in those instances. Medical historians and editors of medieval medical texts may one day find the supposed Latin originals of recipes such as the ones in Heinrich's *Medizinbuch*. The central ingredients in those recipes are agrimony (*Agrimonia eupatoria*) and greater celandine (*Chelidonium majus*).¹⁷

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¹⁷ Medieval Latin *celidonia* is also recorded in the senses 'red horned-poppy (*Glaucium corniculatum*)' and 'yellow horned-poppy (*Glaucium flavum*)' in Hunt (1989: 74–75). The present author would appreciate any information about Latin texts that may lie behind the Middle English recipes.

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